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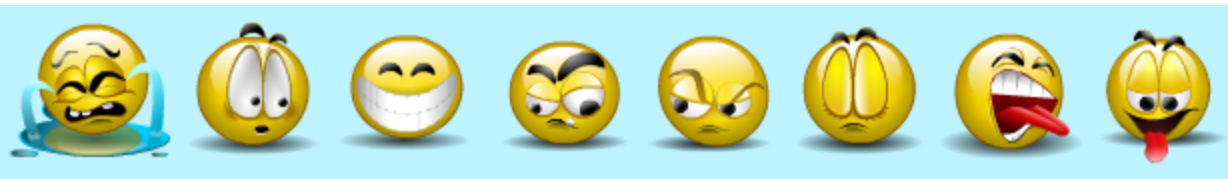

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Friday, Feb 04, 2005



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Posted on Fri, Feb. 04, 2005

Taking root

Ag board right to support vegetable farming

It seems odd that growing tomatoes or blueberries would be more risky than producing a carcinogen or playing global grain markets. But that's the genius of American farm policy.

Until this year, tobacco farmers enjoyed a safe harbor from the squalls of the marketplace in a government price-support program. And the feds regularly send fat checks to the growers of corn, wheat and soybeans.

But farmers who grow vegetables and fruit get no price supports, no subsidies and are darn lucky to even have access to crop insurance.

Despite all that, vegetables will have to play a leading role on Kentucky farms if they are to stay viable as tobacco fades as a small-farm mainstay.

Like tobacco, vegetables can produce a high profit from a small piece of land, which makes them an

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attractive alternative to tobacco. And looking at nearby states' vegetable production, it's obvious Kentucky has lots of room for expansion.

So it's great that the state Agricultural Development Board didn't pull the plug on a struggling cooperative of vegetable growers based in Owensboro.

The board has put \$3 million in tobacco settlement funds into helping the marketing co-op acquire facilities and equipment. But some ag development board members were ready to give up on the co-op because it's still not profitable after five years.

Last year was a disaster for the growers because of massive crop losses brought on by torrential rains.

Despite all that, and with the exception of last year, individual farmers have been making money off vegetables, even if the co-op is not yet profitable.

That, in turn, pumps money into the local economy. More important, farmers see that with time, vegetable production holds the promise of enabling their children to farm.

Even with perfect growing conditions, it's probably unrealistic to expect any growers' cooperative to become self-sufficient in five years. The continued assistance is money well spent if Kentucky is serious about creating a new small-farm economy to replace tobacco.

But the board wisely did not give the growers the entire \$645,000 bailout the co-op was seeking. Instead, the board approved a sensible blend of government assistance and private investment.

This arrangement keeps the growers on the financial hook for making the co-op work. Such public-private partnerships are the best way to ensure that the state's ag diversification efforts are governed by plausible business plans.

The co-op will get a \$200,000 disaster grant, a \$200,000 loan for working capital and \$28,500 to help pay for a production manager, with some strings attached to the funding.

And Kentucky farmers get the message that there might yet be light at the end of Kentucky's tobacco tunnel vision.

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